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ABSTRACT

Realia, authentic documents, and mass media are living daily proof of the value of language. Their authenticity, specialized vocabulary, reinforced grammatical structures, and topics of interest can help encourage interest in the target language and culture. They contain current language on all imaginable topics, and are not artificial or contrived. One of the most compelling reasons for using them is the teacher's involvement in selecting and adapting materials for classroom use. Mass media can help to dispel stereotypes. Realia such as maps and schedules often contain a minimum of language and reduce potential frustration: other kinds of realia lend themselves well to demonstration. Educators differ on whether the materials should be used in their original in an adapted form. The instructor can prepare written materials to accompany the realia, and can easily prepare audiovisual aids with it. One of the key advantages in using realia is its direct link to culture, allowing attention to subtle and not-so-subtle differences between the target culture and our own. Newspapers, magazines, movie ads, mail-order catalogs, television commercials, the Yellow Pages, and souvenirs and other printed materials gathered in travel abroad or requested from other sources are examples of useful realia. (MSE)

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TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES WITH REALIA AND OTHER AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

ERIC Q&A

December 1987

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Teaching Foreign Languages with Realia and Other Authentic Materials

Prepared by Jean–Pierre Berwald

December 1987

What Is Realia?

Realia refers to real objects, specimens or artifacts—not copies, models, or representations—from a particular culture. Indeed, authentic materials, such as newspapers, magazines, catalogs, timetables, films, etc., are designed for use in real–life situations, not for use as instructional tools. Although not designed for instructional use, realia and other authentic materials, including nonprint mass media, provide a wide range of printed and spoken messages that can be used as primary or secondary material in a foreign language classroom. Other examples include telephone books, menus, tickets, and radio and television broadcasts. Geltrich–Ludgate and Tovar (1987) give over seventy examples of realia with recommended uses for each item listed.

Why Use Realia?

The major advantage of using authentic materials and mass media in the foreign language classroom is that they contain current language on all topics imaginable and provide constant reinforcement of grammatical forms learned in the classroom. In addition to containing traditional vocabulary learned in the early stages of language instruction, they may contain neologisms as well as extensive vocabulary for sports, politics, cooking, music, and other topical areas. Perhaps most importantly, mass media provide students the opportunity to read or hear items of personal interest. Furthermore, there is nothing artificial or contrived about foreign media; they have been created for residents and consumers in authentic settings, not for foreign language teachers or students.

One of the most compelling reasons for using mass media is the instructor's participation in the selection and adaptation of the material. The interest and enthusiasm generated for such projects can be easily shared with students; the teacher is presenting a class with his or her very own text. In addition, the material preparation is an excellent way for teachers to develop their own vocabulary and to gain further insight into the culture under study.

One key benefit of using mass media is the opportunity to dispel stereotypes. Mollica (1979) suggests that if textbooks and teachers often reinforce nationalistic stereotypes, contemporary media representations help correct these notions. Students working with media have a chance to see for themselves that some of the more commonly held beliefs of other groups can be erroneous.

Often realia such as maps, schedules, notices, etc. consist of minimum amounts of language thereby reducing potential frustration. Even students considered to be slow language learners should be able to understand certain realia with a feeling of accomplishment.

Some realia such as product copy or instructions lend themselves well to demonstration. Many products sold on the international market today come with instructions in several languages. These can be most useful for learning vocabulary and reinforcing grammatical structures as one inserts a roll of film, shampoos hair, or prepares a dessert. In the last–mentioned, one may also gain experience with metric measures.

How Can Realia Be Used in the Foreign Language Classroom?

The first question is whether authentic materials should be adapted for instructional use, or used in their authentic form. One point of view is that they should be given to students "unadulterated," without commentary, for their interest and appreciation. Kienbaum (1986) describes the implementation of courses based on mass media at Purdue University. Materials were thematically organized and prepared by instructors for two–year programs of French, German, and Spanish. The materials were not simplified or otherwise pre–digested for students since it was felt that the lack of help would be better for their self–confidence in understanding the language and coping with the culture. On the other hand, there is good justification for professional intervention at all levels—especially since a teacher can select materials, explain difficulties of grammar and vocabulary, and point out cultural distinctions. The well–traveled, informed teacher is in the best position to explain hundreds of points of culture as they relate to content and vocabulary. Who else could explain to the students the curious artifact referred to as a *bidet* in a mail-order catalog? When in doubt, the best idea is to experiment with both adapted and unadapted materials; there are advantages to each.

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The preparation of written pedagogical materials to accompany the realia or other authentic materials being used often involves the identification of useful vocabulary items for study and practice, and the development of content questions and exercises designed to help students understand and describe aspects of the foreign culture as presented in the materials under study. Multiple choice questions, based on the corpus, should develop language skills and review grammar at various levels of difficulty.

The instructor can also quite easily prepare audio-visual teaching aids. At the simplest level, printed materials from any source can be enlarged, photocopied, and made into transparencies. Photocopied newspaper pictures also lend themselves well to overhead transparencies. The use of a yellow highlighting pen allows the instructor to focus on segments to be clarified. At a more sophisticated level, one can use a 35mm single–lens–reflex camera and close–up lenses to copy photos from other sources such as books, postcards, or magazines. This is useful for visual reinforcement of texts enabling the instructor to present or review vocabulary and culture. Beyond the photograph, one can prepare audiotape material, such as a news broadcast, for class use. In the case of sound recordings, for instance, one can simply copy one audiocassette onto another cassette, building in one– to two–second pauses at the end of each breath group. This allows students to concentrate on material being heard and gives them time to focus on small units of speech. When using videocassette recordings, the instructor can copy the sound portion onto an audiocassette and prepare from this another audiocassette with pauses, as suggested above. As with other visual images, 35mm slides can be taken directly off the video screen by placing a single-lens-reflex camera on a tripod or table in a dark room, and setting it at the light value given by the camera (generally 1/30 to 1/60 of a second). The slides can then be used to introduce characters, action, and dialog prior to viewing the video; they can also be used, of course, to review the same material.

A Specific Example: Newspapers. Practically all sections of a newspaper are useful for learning specialized vocabulary and cultural characteristics. They include news articles, reviews, headlines, comic strips, and advertisements. The entertainment section is often a good choice since it contains articles and reviews of films and concerts whose star performers may already be known to students. The students may particularly enjoy the movie section of a foreign language newspaper since it often contains ads and reviews of American films they have already seen. They may recognize the names of the actors and be familiar with the story lines. One simple listening comprehension exercise is for the instructor to read aloud various descriptive blurbs of films that have been shown in the U.S. Students then call out the American title, thus proving their comprehension. An assignment given by this writer in a grammar review course involved having the students find film reviews in any French language newspaper or magazine (generally available at our university library). Although each student had a separate review, they all answered a series of general content questions asked in French. Students had to make use of the vocabulary in the questions as well as the vocabulary they discovered in their texts. Typical questions included the following:

1. What is the name of the film?
2. Who are the actors?
3. Where does the action take place?
4. Where was the film shot?
5. In 3-4 sentences, explain what the film was about.
6. What did the critic like and dislike about the film?

In addition to answering questions, students are asked to take ten unknown vocabulary words out of context, find their definitions in a monolingual dictionary, and write them down. They also provide two original sentences which show they understand the meaning of the words. They then submit the answers and vocabulary work to the instructor who returns them to students, with comments and corrections, for the students' use in preparing for a quiz. The day of the quiz, students are asked to bring to class two ten-word lists. The first contains ten key words students have chosen to guide them in preparing a summary of the article. The other list consists of the ten vocabulary words mentioned above without definitions or sentences. The instructor circulates around the class during the quiz and chooses two words from each vocabulary list for which definitions and original sentences are to be given. This is a convenient and effective way to test students on work of their own choosing. Similar assignments are given to students for concert reviews and crime articles.

How Can Realia and Other Authentic Materials Be Used to Teach Culture?

One of the key advantages of using realia is its direct link to culture. The material selected allows us to notice subtle and not–so–subtle differences existing between the target culture and our own. A glance at movie ads, mail-order catalogs, and television commercials, for instance, enables us to see a variety of differences not always apparent in textbooks. This focus on contemporary culture adds an important dimension to language learning and heightens interest. The up–to–date movie schedules, listing films already familiar to students, introduce the use of the 24–hour clock in some countries. Mail-order catalogs present furniture and clothing styles somewhat different from those with which we are familiar. A catalog photo and description of a refrigerator can lead to a discussion of a major difference in eating and shopping habits.

The Yellow Pages throughout the world are a wonderful source of vocabulary and cultural information. Not only do they provide interesting geographical information on each country, but they also contain specialized and contextualized vocabulary in each rubric. Scanlan (1986) finds that many ads

refer to a "vast network of cultural traits and linguistic or historical facts" about people of a particular culture.

Teachers who have traveled in target countries have most likely had personal experience with a wide variety of printed materials. Not only have they observed and learned to appreciate the rich cultural heritage of other countries on their travels, but they have learned to deal with various "institutions" intended for the inhabitants of these countries: filling out forms, telephoning, traveling by train, renting cars, watching television, going to the movies, listening to the radio, eating...in short, enjoying a full life in another culture. A complete range of activities is open to those who are more than casual travelers to a country. Many teachers discover these experiences to be so vital to their own ability to cope in a foreign culture that they make these coping strategies part of their course content. The "souvenirs" they find while traveling—telephone books, tickets, catalogs, bills, and menus—serve as excellent motivational devices for themselves and their students. These objects are not only a series of artifacts that describe the customs and traditions of another culture, but are also a set of teaching aids that facilitate the simulation of experience in the target culture.

Where May One Find Realia?

The vast majority of realia, authentic materials, and mass media are certainly available to all those who travel abroad. Within a brief period of time during the normal course of residing or traveling abroad, one can acquire useful items such as tickets, receipts, and other printed matter. At a nominal cost, one can purchase items such as newspapers, magazines, mail-order catalogs, and telephone directories. In the United States, one can request documentation by writing directly to tourist offices, telephone companies or mail-order establishments. Foreign newspapers and magazines are available in most large cities or university libraries. As for television reception, the use of cable channels and satellite transmissions already enable many of us to receive and tap foreign language telecasts directly off the air. There is no dearth of usable realia available. Foreign printed matter and readily available photocopying machines allow teachers to customize their instruction according to the ability levels and interests of their students.

Realia, authentic documents, and mass media are living daily proof of the value of language. Their authenticity, specialized vocabulary, reinforced grammatical structures, and topics of interest can serve as important factors in encouraging an interest in the target language and culture.

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